standard 'one truth, many contents' position. We have no choice but to
distinguish differences in content in any case. Even an enthusiastic diversifier
of truth who holds that the truth possessed by, say, certain statements about
the comic differs from the truth possessed by certain statements about
particles in physics, will not think that the truth possessed by 'There are
electrons' differs from the truth possessed by 'There are protons'. The
difference is in what is true, in content. Moreover, articulating the attractive
approach to content in terms of truth conditions will become much more
complicated for diversifiers about truth. For instance, when discussing
differences in content they will need to distinguish differences in truth along
with differences in conditions. Hence, simplicity of theory recommends
making do with a single concept of truth if we can. No doubt Wright will
insist that we cannot.2

Notes

1. For more on this, see Michael Smith, 'Why Expressivists about Value should love
   Minimalism about Truth', forthcoming in Analysis.
2. I am greatly indebted to comments from Michael Smith, Peter Menzies, Graham
   Oppy, and Philip Pettit.

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RESPONSE TO JACKSON

Philosophers jealously guard traditional debates. Any attempt to re-draw
the boundaries of such a debate, dissolving certain entrenched constituencies
thereby, is therefore bound to meet with opposition. Frank Jackson comes to
the defence of the expressivist and error-theoretic constituencies in traditional
realist/anti-realist debate, arguing that the attempt to marginalise them
made in the first two chapters of Truth and Objectivity is unsuccessful. However
I remain unmoved. I shall comment briefly on his remarks on expressivism
and error-theory in turn. Jackson is also sceptical about the pluralism
concerning truth canvassed in Truth and Objectivity. I shall say a little about
that in conclusion.

1. Expressivism

The Truth and Objectivity argument against expressivism about, for example,
ethical discourse has three components:

(i) Minimalism about truth – the contention that it is necessary and
    sufficient, in order for a predicate to qualify as a truth predicate, that
    it satisfy each of a basic set of platitudes about truth: that to assert is to
    present as true, that statements which are apt for truth have
    negations which are likewise, that truth is one thing, justification
    another, and so on.

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(ii) The thesis that any assertoric discourse will allow the definition upon its sentences of a predicate which qualifies as a truth predicate in the light of (i).

(iii) The thesis that a discourse should be reckoned as assertoric just in case its ingredient sentences are subject to certain minimal constraints of syntax – embeddability within negation, the conditional, contexts of propositional attitude, etc. – and discipline: their use must be governed by agreed standards of warrant.

The most likely expressivist resistance to this line would involve, one would expect, argument against (i) – argument for a more robust conception of truth than minimalism allows. However Jackson, who likes minimalism about truth (though unenthusiastic about that title), marks out for the expressivist the option of repudiating claim (iii) instead. In company with Michael Smith and others, he argues that this is a principled option. The key to it is the platitude that assertion, when sincere, is the expression of belief.* For it may happen, according to Jackson, that the indicative sentences of a discourse which meets the constraints of syntax and discipline demanded by (iii) nevertheless fail to express beliefs, because of some further features of the notion of belief. Just this, so the expressivist may contend, is what happens in ethics if one is prepared to be Humean about the distinction between belief and desire. On such a view, ethical sentences, for all that they meet the relevant syntactic constraints and are subject to a high degree of discipline, fail to express beliefs because the attitudes which they do express would seem to have an intrinsically motivational component, whereas belief, on the Humean view, does not.

This is an objection which has already received some discussion in the literature. Fully to respond to it would take me further afield than it is here possible to go. Let me merely indicate the direction of what I take to be the correct response.

It would be natural to counter that Jackson’s reservation is well taken only if the Humean view of belief is well taken, and that other views are competitive. A quite different conception, espoused for instance by John McDowell, would hold that a proper moral epistemology will write the propensity to certain sorts of concern into the account of what it is to recognise moral truths. But this response would miss the point of Jackson’s objection. The argument of Truth and Objectivity was supposed to cut the ground from under the expressivist; but if Jackson is right, then, to the contrary, the expressivist is alive and well and locked in debate with John McDowell. The expressivist – Humean – camp may prove to lose out in that controversy. But (iii), so says the objection, effectively presupposes a certain outcome; so the fast-track refutation based upon it fails.

The correct response to Jackson’s objection, it seems to me, is rather that he has merely hijacked the word ‘belief’. Claim (iii) is not hostage, via the assertion/belief platitude, to a correct philosophical psychology of belief. Rather, any attitude is a belief which may be expressed by the sincere endorsement of a sentence which complies with the constraints of syntax and discipline imposed by (iii). I do not deny the right of a philosopher to insist on a more exigent sense of ‘belief’, in accordance with which only sentences

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count as belief-expressive which come out on the right side of the functional distinction, or an improved successor to the functional distinction, which the Humean view regards as central. And no doubt moral beliefs may turn out not to count as beliefs in this richer sense. But it is not belief in such a richer sense that the assertion/belief platitude concerns.

Jackson will likely respond that it is I who am hijacking ‘belief’ and subjecting it to a diluting redefinition. But the linguistic data, for what they are worth, don’t support him. Ordinary intuition does not scruple to characterise a person’s moral convictions as ‘beliefs’; and if a belief is anything which may collaborate with a desire in the generation of a practical syllogism, then isn’t

John wishes to encourage his children to avoid wrongdoing
John holds that lying is wrong
Therefore, John has reason to discourage his children from lying

a practical syllogism, and isn’t ‘John wishes to discourage his children from wrongdoing’ the ascription of a desire?

This is not to undercut the debate between McDowell and the Humean, nor – as Smith suggests5 – is it to take the anti-Humean side. Rather it is to recommend a shift in the vocabulary of that debate. The Humean’s point should be that moral attitudes can qualify only as minimal beliefs, and lie on the wrong side of any more stringent, functional classification, in which ‘belief’ is reserved for more-than-minimal usage, marking the imprints of (dispassionate) cognitive engagement with the world. McDowell, by contrast, should be seen as challenging any implication of a tension between passion and cognition.

Finally, let me repeat what was stressed in Truth and Objectivity6 that none of this is supposed to refute expressivism. Claims (i) and (iii) have the status of recommendations, offered on the basis of theoretical advantage. For the theorist who wishes, the route into expressivism via a denial of (iii) remains an option. But a theorist who takes this option because of the attractions of a Humean conception of belief accomplishes no more, I reckon, than to safeguard a distinction – if it is indeed good – which it will be open to the minimalist about belief to express in other terms; and of course the costs – in terms of the affront to common sense, the headache of ‘mixed’ inferences, moral modus ponens,6 etc., – are expensive and familiar.

2. Error Theory

Suppose an internally highly disciplined discourse – ethics, or pure mathematics for instance – with all the syntactic trappings of assertoric content. What are the options for a philosopher who holds that, save in vacuous cases, the beliefs expressible in the discourse are sweepingly and systematically false? Suppose, as Jackson is willing for the sake of argument to do – he clearly has reservations on both points – that the notion of superassertibility characterisable on the basis of the standards of warrant operative in the discourse will satisfy the minimal truth-platitudes, and that any warrant to assert is, necessarily, warrant to regard as superassertible. Then if we may
take the truth predicate operative over the discourse to be that notion of superassertibility, we have as much reason to regard any particular statement of the discourse as true as we have reason to assert it in the light of the discourse's internal standards of warrant. The error theorist would therefore seem to have just two options: to make a case that the truth predicate that operates in the discourse is not that notion of superassertibility, or to argue that none — or anyway not enough — of the statements of the discourse are really assertible by its own internal standards. The latter option then embraces two further foreseeable sub-options: to disclose some incoherence in the discourse's standards of warrant, or to show that they are in fact much more demanding than they are customarily taken to be, with almost all opinion that we ordinarily take to be vindicated by them not really being so.  

In typical cases, the conviction of the error-theorist will be that the statements of the discourse involve commitments for which the satisfaction of its standards of warrant can provide no real justification. Thus Mackie takes our moral judgements to embrace a commitment to the instantiation in the world of a certain kind of metaphysically outlandish property, something for which a good pedigree by the standards of ordinary rational moral argument provides no evidence whatever. Likewise Field takes it that pure mathematical statements typically involve reference to and quantification over abstract entities whose existence mathematical proof — or what is standardly accepted as proof — is powerless to guarantee. The commitment of such theorists, then, is to a distinction between the truth predicate which actually informs such discourses and the notion of superassertibility which may be defined upon the ordinary standards of good moral argument and mathematical proof. This is a commitment to a certain kind of account of the meaning of the statements of a contested discourse which the initial presumption should be against, once we see that a conception of truth is to hand which will avoid the charge of massive error. For charitable interpretation dictates that we should avoid that charge if we possibly can, that is, unless best sense is made of the discourse by an account of its content which sustains a gap between truth and superassertibility. Thus a proponent of Mackie ought to show that we make best sense of moral discourse by interpreting its claims as involving commitment to the existence of metaphysically outlandish properties; and a proponent of Field ought to show that we make best sense of mathematical discourse not merely by construing its semantics platonistically, but by so conceiving the types of object thereby recognised that their existence is beyond mathematical proof.  

This form of option, and the alternative — that of arguing that none or almost none of our convictions expressed in the discourse in question actually meet its internal standards — define the space within which the error-theorist has to work and, so it seems to me, make life more difficult for him than is usually recognised. Jackson, however, clearly thinks that the error-theorist's life is no more difficult after *Truth and Objectivity* than before. I have had some difficulty seeing what exactly is the focus of Jackson's disagreement here. Some clouding of the geography is occasioned by his representing Mackie as taking the second option — of denying that moral judgements really are warranted — rather than as relying upon a distinction
between truth and superassertibility within ethics. But Jackson proceeds to correct that impression. The crux of his objection seems rather to be that

. . . the history of human thought provides many examples of discourses that have coherent, articulated and acknowledged standards of proper use, and yet many or most of the statements that satisfy those standards and so are assertible in this sense, are false. Sometimes, for instance, in Aristotelian and Newtonian physics, and Ptolemaic cosmology, the falsity was not known at the time when the theories and discourses were first set up. Sometimes, as in ideal gas theory and in point mass models of planetary motion, the falsity was known from the beginning. (This volume, p. 167f.)

These examples are uniformly wide of the mark. None of them is clearly a case of metaphysical error. And all are cases of theories discarded in the light of the ordinary standards of warrant for scientific theory — theories whose component statements, or at least those of them we have seen fit to discard, ought therefore not to be accounted as superassertible in the first place. An error-theoretic view of such examples is hardly controversial. But it does not depend on a gap between truth and superassertibility (however attractive such a gap may seem to those of scientific-realist inclination) and in any case the reminder that there are such examples changes nothing. I do not see that Jackson provides any grounds for thinking either that the options for the error-theorist are not as depicted in Truth and Objectivity, or that it is easier, either in general or in the special case of ethics, to take up those options than was there implied.

3. A Plurality of Truth Predicates?

Jackson refers to Quine’s well-known thought that there are not different kinds of existence, only different kinds of existents. We should take a similar view, he urges, about truth. There are not different kinds of truth, but only systematic differences in the truth-bearers, the contents that are, or are not, true.

I suspect the impression that the pluralism canvassed in Truth and Objectivity is at odds with this rests on a misunderstanding. Certainly I ought not to have written, if indeed I did, in a way which suggested ambiguity in the word ‘true’. An ambiguous term will typically allow of two (or more) quite different kinds of explanation each determining a different extension for it. But if a truth predicate is any that satisfies the minimal set of platitudes — if there is no more to being a truth predicate than that —, then those platitudes enshrine all that can be said about the explanation of the word, which is therefore uniform. Since, moreover, the platitudes ensure that any truth predicate for a given discourse will satisfy the Disquotational Scheme, there is no question of a pair of predicates each qualifying as a truth predicate for a given discourse yet differing in extension. There are not, then, different kinds of truth as there are different kinds of seal, charge, ash, bank, quarry and report.
So wherein are supposed to consist the differences? As a parallel, consider the notion of identity. Assume for the sake of argument that, analogously to the minimalist conception of truth, identity can be characterised by the twin plativitudes that everything is self-identical, and that identicals share all their properties. Should we say that the concept of identity is therefore the same, no matter what kinds of things we consider? If we do, the claim had better be consistent with recognising that what constitutes identity is subject to considerable variation in tandem with the change in the kinds of objects concerned. If $a$ and $b$ are material objects, then their identity is constituted by spatial and temporal continuity; if they are numbers, then, on Frege's famous account, their identity is constituted by the one-to-one correspondence of an associated pair of concepts; if they are the directions of a pair of lines, then their identity is constituted by those lines' being parallel; if they are persons, then their identity is constituted by - well, who can say exactly, but considerations of both psychological and bodily continuity will be paramount. Or consider the case of necessity. There is little attraction in the idea that the meaning of 'necessary' varies, according to whether it is prefixed by 'logically', or 'physically', or 'morally', etc. But to insist on its univocity should be consistent with recognising what may harmlessly - if perhaps rather flabbily - be described as differences in the concept of necessity, depending upon whether it is logical, physical or moral necessity that we are concerned with. And these, again, are differences in constitution, differences in what makes for necessity in the different kinds of case.

This talk of 'constitution' needs work, of course, but the authenticity of this general shape of distinction should not be in doubt. Pluralism about truth is the contention that such a distinction may engage the concept of truth, that there need be no single discourse-invariant thing in which truth consists. Depending upon the region of discourse with which we are concerned, it may consist in superassertibility, or not; in representation of an explanatorily active state of affairs, or not; in a fact about the direction of ideal opinion, or not; and so on.

Maybe Jackson would want to disagree even with this. In any case, I feel under no pressure to disagree with his concluding suggestion that all relevant explanatory purposes in the vicinity can be served by distinctions among types of content. For if content is determined by truth conditions, then to recognise variety in the constitution of truth for statements in different regions of discourse, is in effect to recognise systematic differences in the type of content possessed by such statements - just as to recognise variety in the constitution of identity for stones, people and numbers is to recognise differences in the categories of object concerned. Such differences in content will indeed suffice to reflect whatever pluralism is a going concern here; additional differences between kinds of truth will have no explanatory role to play. Truth and Objectivity does not claim otherwise.

Notes

1. Thus Paul Boghossian, for instance in, 'The Status of Content' (Philosophical Review, 1989, pp 157–183), takes it that a non-factualist view of any discourse must involve commitment to a robust conception of truth for its statements. If
the non-factualist takes a minimalist (or deflationary) view of truth, then — Boghossian assumes — the statements of the discourse will qualify as truth-apt just in virtue of its assertoric shape, and the non-factualist won't have room to formulate his distinctive thesis. But this, as Jackson points out, would seem to be an oversight. One can be selective about which assertoric discourses are truth-apt while holding, for those which are, that truth is the metaphysically lightweight property which minimalism takes it to be. Minimalism about truth need not be accompanied by minimalism about truth aptitude.


9. Not all forms of platonist construal would have this effect, of course.
10. 'As Wright observes, Mackie's error theory derives from his conviction that moral judgements carry the "implication of metaphysically preposterous properties". If this is right, then ethical assertions are not warrantedly assertible, for we are not warranted in believing metaphysically preposterous properties.' This volume, p. 167.
11. I suspect Wright will insist that this rejection misunderstands the relevant sense of warranted assertibility. What is meant is assertibility by the standards of the discourse' (ibid).

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BOOK REVIEWS

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